

America: The Story of Us

Episode 10: WWII

Introduction

It is 1939 and while war breaks out in Europe, America remains mired in the Great Depression. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941 thrusts the U.S. into the war, changing the nation from an isolationist continent to a global player.

The nation taps into the vast manufacturing reserves that have been idle for ten years: factories, electrical plants, railroads. The war gives jobs to seven million unemployed – many of them women, nicknamed “Rosie the Riveters.” By 1944, the U.S. is producing 40% of the world’s armaments. The might of America’s strategy and supplies turns the tide of war. The U.S. Air Force launches pioneering daylight bombing raids over occupied Europe in B-17 bombers. Under the command of General Dwight Eisenhower, D-Day is an astonishing success.

In 1945, war in the Pacific is brought to a close by the atomic bomb. The enormous consequences of the atomic bomb would be debated for decades. Much of Europe is in tatters, and millions of Jews lost their lives in the Holocaust. As the war ends in 1945, a new world order has been created – and America has changed forever.



Discussion Questions:

1. Why did the U.S. avoid involvement in WWII until December 1941? Why was the Pearl Harbor attack such a shock to the U.S.?
2. Why was the invention of penicillin so important in the context of WWII? What were some other advances in medicine that were important during the war?
3. How were women affected by WWII? Do you think the war advanced the rights of women?
4. What were some of the arguments for and against using the atomic bomb?

6. Overall, what were the consequences of WWII for the United States? How was the U.S. changed by the war?

Primary Source: Before the United States entered the war, Joe Ichiuji, an American citizen of Japanese descent, was a corporal in the U.S. Army. Within two months of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army discharged him and placed his family in an internment camp. When government recruiters came to this camp seeking recruits for an all Japanese-American combat unit in 1943, Ichiuji was one of the first to volunteer. Below are Ichiuji's recollections of this turbulent period, which proved to be the ultimate test of allegiance.

Recollections of a Japanese-American World War II Veteran

On loyalty:

"Japanese-Americans had to prove that they were loyal Americans because they had two battles to fight. One against the enemy in Europe and the Pacific, and the other against racial prejudice in the United States..."

On Pearl Harbor:

"I felt very badly because the country of my parents would attack the United States. Here I'm an American citizen. I'm in uniform and I just wondered why would they do a thing like that and how would I face my friends, my comrades in the Army, that was my concern..."

On the internment camp:

"The morale of the relocation camp was low after being uprooted from their home and friends and placed in the middle of the desert. On top of that the camp was surrounded by barbed wire and it was guarded by armed soldiers. The camp life was regimented like the Army - you were assigned a number, you had to line up for mess, shower and toilet. And my family lost the control and as time went by they adjusted to camp life and they made the best of it."

On the possibility of rejoining the Army:

"I just didn't want to give up this chance to show my loyalties as an American citizen and serve my country. Even though I was discharged and evacuated and placed in a camp and treated as an enemy alien. I thought that by proving that I was a loyal American, the people outside, you know, they would have confidence in us and remove us from the camp - that was my aim."

1. What do you think were some of the reasons Ichiuji wanted to serve in the Army despite the prejudice he might have faced?

2. Why do you think Japanese Americans were interned in camps during WWII? The U.S. government later apologized to Japanese Americans for these actions. Do you think a similar situation could happen in our world today? Explain